

## Spectacular Snakes of Australia

By Michael Cermak

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It is fair to say that, of Australia's vertebrate wildlife, snakes top the 'least popular' list. In fact, a recent study noted that of all the animals likely to be encountered in suburbia, snakes were the *least* desired around people's homes (Davies *et al.* 2004). Mentioning a fondness for snakes in polite company will often result in people smiling nervously, shuffling a few paces away, and quietly hoping that the malaise is not contagious.

I imagine that this is a situation that Michael Cermak has experienced more than once. In the preface to *Spectacular Snakes of Australia*, he relates his experiences over four decades, firstly as an amateur reptile keeper, and later as a lowly-paid professional (not much has changed in earning potential since then). Importantly, the preface also explains the aim and target audience of this book. This is *not* a field guide – there are a number of excellent national and regional field guides for Australian snakes; rather, in the words of the author, this book is intended to 'visually portray snakes, their habitats, predators and prey, alongside informative text, digestible not only by reptile enthusiasts but by anyone who appreciates wildlife and natural history' (p. vii).

The book follows a taxonomic format, showcasing representative or particularly interesting

members of the families of Australian snakes, with a very brief overview of sea snakes and sea kraits. The accounts typically describe each snake's habits, habitat, predators, prey and reproduction, with numerous photographs of each of these subtopics. As in most modern books on reptiles, the photographs are very good. And as in several other books on Australian reptiles, the photogenic Green Python graces the front cover. A brief glossary is provided.

As well as imparting a great deal of factual information from recent decades of research by others, Cermak infuses the text with many anecdotes and facts from his own considerable experience (including observations from captive husbandry, and field experiences such as being bitten by a large Scrub Python!). The work is up-to-date, covering the recent discovery of a third species of Taipan and a second King Brown Snake.

The book has few faults – a couple of minor grammatical errors, and one photograph is out of place on page 81. I believe that any book that covers snakes should include a guide to snakebite first aid. I realise this is not within the explicit scope of the book, but it is a simple inclusion, and I like to see this information imparted at every opportunity, particularly when the likely readership will include young, passionate herpetologists who are known for their risk-taking.

Owing to the subject matter, I imagine that this book will not have a particularly wide readership, and most purchases will be by those already interested in snakes. This is a shame,

because this is precisely the type of book and format that can engender an appreciation of these maligned animals.

### Reference

Davies RG, Webber LM and Barnes GS (2004) Urban wildlife management – it's as much about people! In *Urban Wildlife: More Than Meets the Eye*. Eds Lunney D & Burgin S. (Sydney: Royal Zoological Society of New South Wales)

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